

THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ECLIPSE  
OF ROBERT HENRYSON'S "FAIR CRESSEID"

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In his *Defence of Poetry*, Sir Philip Sidney says that poetry is "metaphorically, a speaking picture—with this end, to teach and delight" and that poets are seers who make a golden world from nature's world of brass (25, 24). Yet in his digression on English poetry and drama, he finds few such poets at work in England. After a few lines (64-65) of moderate praise for *The Mirror for Magistrates* ("meetly furnished of beautiful parts"), *The Shepherds' Calendar* ("much poetry . . . worthy the reading"), the lyrics of Surrey (they testify to their author's noble birth), and *Gorboduc* (for its sounding rhetoric and adherence to the Unities), Sidney castigates English poets at length (65-74) for puerile rhymes and a deficiency of poetic fire. What of Chaucer? Sidney is not so much surprised by Chaucer's "great wants, fit to be forgiven in so reverent an antiquity" as by the failure of his poetic successors to profit from their master's example. Chaucer

did excellently in his *Troilus and Criseyde*; of whom, truly, I know not whether to marvel more, either that he in that misty time could see so clearly, or that we in this clear age go so stumblingly after him. (64)

One could infer from this well-known passage that the *Troilus-Cressida* story reached England from a crystalline, antique fountain only to become sullied in the bogs and runnels of what C. S. Lewis termed the Drab Age (222-71). Nowadays it is recognized, to be sure, that the matter is not so simple. However, such recognition has not led to adequate reassessment of the poems that Sidney so severely condemned.

Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* offers a sympathetic, multilayered portrayal of its main character. Henryson created a narrator beset by internal conflict. A lover himself, he treats Cressida sympathetically even as he acknowledges her deeds. Henryson carries forward the Cressida story but imbues it with an agonistic theme that informs numerous Cressida poems of the early sixteenth century. This theme persists in the form of debate in paired poems on Troilus and Cressida and in such authors as Robert Greene, but the content of the Troilus-Cressida story begins to fall into neglect, its complexity reduced to often formulaic simplicity, if not simplism. When Cressida's story becomes lost, what in Henryson was a powerful tool in the revelation of character—both Cressida's and the narrator's—degenerates into jest, satire, and invective that say less about Cressida—now often a mere counter—than about the hopes and frustrations of young men about town playing at love. The eclipse of Henryson's "fair Cresseid" came about because young male readers desired a type of amusement incompatible with Henrysonian high seriousness.

### **Reframing the discussion of the Chaucer-Henryson story of Troilus and Cressida**

Henryson's *Testament* first appeared in print as the sixth book of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, and scholars have debated whether or not Early Modern readers guessed that Henryson's work was distinct from that of Chaucer. Henryson's editors (e.g., Fox 18-20; Skeat lv; Wood xxx) have duly canvassed arguments on both sides of this question. The only sure starting point appears to be Francis Thynne's confidence that *he* could distinguish Chaucer from Henryson, and that Thomas Speght *ought* to have been able to do so too. But beginning in confidence leads here only to more uncertainty and, in my case, to the conviction that we need to ask a different question.

Thomas Speght's 1598 Chaucer offered a table of contents that summarizes each of the works he included. The summary for the Chaucer-Henryson *Troilus* mentions events that occur only in Henryson:

In this excellent booke is shewed the fervent love of  
Troilus to Criseyde, whome he enjoyed for a time: and  
her great untruth to him againe in giving herselfe to

Diomedes, who in the end did so cast her off that she came to great miserie.<sup>2</sup> ("Arguments" sig. c.v<sup>v</sup>; my emphasis)

In his *Animadversions on Speght's Chaucer*, Francis Thynne suggested that "it wolde be good that Chaucers proper woorkes were distinguysht from the adulterat, and suche as were not his, as the Testamente of Cressyde . . ." (69). Speght's response was three-fold. He retained the conflated *Troilus* in his 1602 edition, he placed his 1598 summary table of contents summary directly before the poem, and he amplified it with an additional sentence: "In which discourse Chaucer liberally treateth of the diuine perueiaunce" (fol. 143). This sentence, surely an allusion to the opening stanzas of the *Testament*, strengthens Speght's apparent argument that his *Troilus* is one work and not two.

But why does Thynne criticize Speght for having printed virtually the same conflated *Troilus* as William Thynne had printed in 1532? Did the elder Thynne know he had printed a sixth book that Chaucer did not write? Perhaps. In his 1532 edition he ended each of Chaucer's first four books with a one-line explicit, but he blew a trumpet by announcing at the conclusion of the fifth book, "Thus endeth the fyfth and laste booke of Troylus: and here foloweth the pyteful and dolorous testament of fayre Creseyde" (fol. ccxix). Moreover, he prefaced what we know as Henryson's *Testament* with "The testament of Creseyde" in the same large type as he used for the titles of other separate works in his edition. Maybe Francis Thynne objected to Speght's six-book *Troilus*, then, not because it contained six books but because Speght did not acknowledge the separateness of Henryson's *Testament* as clearly as Thynne thought his father had acknowledged it. Given not only the *explicit*s and the typographic evidence but also the inclusion of numerous other pieces by Chaucer's poetic successors, one could argue that William Thynne—and Richard Pynson before him—cared less about who owned a text than about printing as many as possible of what Skeat called "Chaucerian and other pieces." But did Speght recognize after all that Chaucer's *Troilus* and Henryson's *Testament* were separate pieces? There is some evidence that he did. Though he published a Chaucer-Henryson *Troilus*, he calls it—and Thynne did not notice this—a *five-book* work in his table of contents and leaves white space between entries for these books and the entry for the *Testament* (fol. xix). Fascinating though it is, the evidence as to whether editors

did or did not recognize the separateness of Chaucer's and Henryson's *Troilus-Cressida* poems remains equivocal.

That the question resists a definitive answer suggests the need for a new question. Asking who knew or did not know that Henryson owned the *Testament* and Chaucer the *Troilus* reflects modern concerns about intellectual property, but if the question mattered as much in medieval and Early Modern times as it does to us, then why didn't medieval and Early Modern readers and authors answer it more clearly? Is it that they were unable to make clear what they knew, or have we been trying to extract from them an answer to a question they did not ask and perhaps did not care about? Instead of asking why readers could or could not separate Henryson from Chaucer, we should ask how they read the six-book Chaucer-Henryson poem placed before them. We should ask what made Henryson's *Testament* seem a suitable conclusion to Chaucer's *Troilus*. Redirecting our questions both allows more respectful treatment of early readers of Chaucer and opens the way for more sympathetic reading of Henryson and of subsequent works based on the *Testament*. Redirecting our questions allows us to recuperate several *Troilus-Cressida* poems dismissed as trivial, but also to explain in cultural terms why Cressida finally became a one-dimensional figure. William Thynne's reference to "the pyteful and dolorous testament of fayre Creseyde" (fol. CCxix') offers a point of departure.

**"I have pietie thou suld fall sic mischance":**

**Henryson's conflicted narrator**

Far from constituting a critical statement, Thynne's intercalary note probably reflected current opinion that Henryson's poem was "pyteful and dolorous." Of course one can find condemnation of Cresseid like this:

O fair Cresseid, the flour and A per se  
Of Troy and Grece, how was thou fortunait!  
To change in filth all thy Feminite,  
And be with fleschlie lust sa maculait,  
A go amang the Greikis air and lait  
Sa giglotlike, takand thy foull pleasaunce! (78-83)

But however frequently the passage is quoted, it remains the only such passage in the *Testament* outside the denunciations of the gods. Indeed, the poem as a whole is far from a condemnation of Cresseid. As Robert L. Kindrick has finely stated,

Henryson is not being ironic in his sympathetic comments. Every indication is that he is trying to build sympathy in the minds of his audience. . . . To say that [Cresseid] has not been redeemed is to say that her suffering is pointless and that Henryson is taking nothing more than sadistic delight in her plight. Cresseid's suffering, however, leads to her redemption in terms of self-knowledge, knowledge of love, and charity. (147)

Henryson achieves this sympathetic portrayal by his use of the poem's narrator. The narrator's experiences as a lover involve him in Cresseid's fate to such a degree that he argues in Cresseid's favor even as sees her failings. Indeed, narratorial conflict between condemning what Cresseid did and loving what she has been offered later authors a mine from which to extract whichever nuggets might best adorn the poetic cases they were trying to make.

The narrator, always a devotee of Venus and shivering in the cold, expresses an old man's hope that "My faidit hart of lufe scho wald mak grene" (line 24). This color motif recurs in Cresseid's lament to Cupid:

Ye causit me always understand and trow  
The seid of lufe was sawin in my face,  
And ay grew grene throw your supplie and grace. (136-38)

Indeed, the color is later associated with Venus herself, whose garment is "ane half grene, the uthir Sabill black" (221), a visual representation of her inconstancy, what Henryson calls her "variance" (223, 230, 235), "Now hait, now cauld, now blyith, now full of wo, / Now grene as leif, now widderit and ago" (237-38). Like Cresseid, the elderly narrator places his hope of remaining "green" in a goddess who is essentially fickle. Like Cresseid, the narrator places himself in Fortune's hands (412, 454, 469).

In this regard, Henryson's narrator is not unlike Troilus, who has "pietie" on the leprous Cresseid because she reminds him of the lady he loved (496, 519). This key word appears elsewhere only in connection

with the narrator, in his assertion, "I have pietie thou suld fall sic mischance" (84), an arresting *non sequitur* that directly follows the lines of condemnation quoted earlier. Faced with Cresseid's present misdeeds, neither the narrator nor Troilus can do other than palliate them by invoking her beauty, her kindness, and the memory of the love she once showed. Indeed, the narrator recapitulates in his own voice Cresseid's early accusation of the gods:

O cruell Saturne! Fraward and angrie,  
Hard is thy dome, and to malitious;  
On fair Cresseid quhy he thou na mercie,  
Quhilk was sa sweit, gentill and amorous?  
Withdraw thy sentence and be gracious  
As thou was never; so schawis thy deid,  
Ane wraikfull sentence gevin on fair Cresseid.  
(323-29; cp. lines 134-40)

All too cognizant of Cresseid's failings, the narrator yet resolves to tell her story sympathetically because he admires her.

I sall excuse, als ferfurth as I may,  
Thy womanheid, thy wisdom and fairnes. (86-87)

That the narrator bases his judgment of Cresseid on the fact that she is sweet, amorous, gentle, and fair (this last term he employs over a dozen times) may cause some to question his judgment, but my point is that the narrator's conflicted account of Cresseid offers sufficient evidence to support either condemnation or sympathy towards her. Indeed, the essence of the narrator's internal conflict is that he can see both with equal clarity. Whether or not one agrees with the narrator's extreme assertion that Cresseid's misfortune came about through Fortune "and nothing throw the gilt / Of the . . ." (90-91), the *Testament* offers an interpretation of the famous love story that permits and even encourages diverse interpretations. There is no need to posit a sympathetic Chaucer and a stern Henryson. Indeed, because Henryson's poem is ambivalent, as indeed Chaucer's also is, it is not surprising to me that the two poems were often seen as one. That this internal debate about Cressida's character may have passed from Henryson into the Cressida poems of the sixteenth century is especially

important because these latter poems have been dismissed as dull, as univocal, as drab.

**"The dialogue of one":**

**Implied multivalence in early Troilus-Cressida poems**

In the first part of the sixteenth century, authors drew inspiration from the emphasis of Henryson's narrator both on Cressida's beauty and on her flaws. John Skelton in separate poems echoes the Henrysonian dual perspective. Skelton's poem "To my lady Elisabeth Howarde," was published in 1522 as part of his *Garlande of Laurell*. "To be your remembrauncer, madame, I am bounde," Skelton writes (*Works* 1: 396), and well he might. Elizabeth was a daughter of one of Henry VIII's most powerful noblemen, Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk. In this epideictic context Cressida's sudden appearance may come as a surprise:

Goodly Cresseid, fayrer than Polexene,  
For to enuyue Pandarus appetite;  
Troilus, I trowe, if that he had not you sene,  
In you he wolde haue set his hole delight. . . . (1: 396-97)

If likening Lady Elizabeth to Cressida and suggesting that, if Troilus had seen her first he would not have fastened upon Cressida, constitutes praise, perhaps we need to rethink our conception of Cressida. Moreover, Skelton had told the story very differently fifteen years earlier in Philip Sparrow, where Troilus's fidelity is to no avail because Cressida is faithless:

She made hym to syng  
The song of lovers lay;  
Musyng nyght and day,  
Mournyng all alone,  
Comfort had he none  
For she was quyte gone;  
Thus in conclusyon,  
She brought him in abusyon;  
In earnest and in game  
She was moch to blame;  
Disparaged is her fame

And blemysshed is her name,  
In maner half with shame. . . . (*Works* 1: 72)

Skelton saw Cressida the culpable deceiver and Cressida the fair, golden-haired lady, and felt no need to choose between them. The success of both poems suggests that an account of Troilus's gullibility and Cressida's abuse of him was appropriate subject matter for an avuncular poem addressing a bookish young woman, and that praising a highborn lady in terms of Cressida's beauty and Troilus's and Pandarus's appreciation of it was a good thing for a courtier-poet to do. Perhaps the two ladies and their admiring poet decided that Cressida, like Shakespeare's Cleopatra, is too complex, too multifaceted, and so much larger than life that simple adoration or simple condemnation are alike irrelevant. In taking such a decision, were they prompted by Henryson's narrator? I think maybe they were.

Such tension may inform one of the most popular poems of the age, William Elderton's ballad, "The Pangs of Love and Lovers' Fits," which contains the following stanza:

Knowe ye not howe Troylus  
Languished and lost his ioye  
with fittes and feuers mervailous  
For Cresseda that dwelt in Troye  
Tyll pytie planted in her brest  
ladie ladie.  
To slepe with him & graunt him rest  
my deare ladie. (Collmann 111)

The stanza alone might suggest to the unwary reader that Troilus had enjoyed Cressida's love and lived with her happily ever after. Perhaps Elderton was unaware that the Troilus-Cressida story ended sadly. However, if we possessed the text of Skelton's praise for Lady Elizabeth Howard in the *Garlande of Laurell*, but not the text of *Philip Sparrow*, we might draw the same conclusion about him. So for Elderton we can fall back on other explanations:

- The exigencies of stanza form and rime scheme discouraged Elderton from telling the full story.



- Other stanzas in “The Pangs” describe lovers who began happily and ended in woe, so Elderton expected his readers and hearers to supply the ending of the Cressida story.
- Ballads are humble creations, and balladeers merely dismiss small dissonances.
- Those who paid their pennies for broadside street ballads really did not care about the kind of inconsistency that matters so much to modern scholars.

The trouble with such speculation is that it privileges some sort of extrinsic critical canon, e.g., the ballad is too humble to warrant careful attention, rather than offering analysis of both text and context. Dismissal of Elderton’s work as mere balladry, already problematic, seems untenable when we find the Troilus-Cressida story similarly employed in “A comparison of his loue wyth the faithfull and painful loue of Troylus to Creside.” First appearing in *Tottel’s Miscellany*, the “Comparison” presents the kind of dissonant account of the Troilus-Cressida story that we saw in Elderton, and in the two poems of Skelton.

The “Comparison” describes a lover who attempts to flatter his beloved into accepting him. The poem’s speaker likens himself to Troilus, who, he reminds us, immured himself in his darkened chamber, where Pandarus found him sobbing and wailing in a manner premonitory of the juvenile Romeo in the business of Rosaline. The speaker tells us that Troilus’s

. . . chamber was his common walke,  
Wherin he kept him secretely,  
He made his bedde the place of talke,  
To hear his great extremite.  
In nothing els had he delight,  
But euen to be a martyr right.  
And now to call her by her name  
And straight therwith to sigh and throbbe:  
And when his fansyes might not frame,  
Then into teares and so to sobbe,  
All in extreames and thus he lyes  
Making two fountains of his eyes.  
(*Tottel’s Miscellany* 1: 184)

The speaker describes Troilus's protestation that he will serve Cressida in every possible way and, far from alluding to her betrayal of Troilus, insists that she became "Physician to his woe." Cressida, he says,

... toke him to her handes and grace,  
And said she would her minde apply,  
To helpe him in his wofull case,  
If she might be his remedy.  
And thus they say to ease his smart,  
She made him owner of her hart. (1: 184)

Did this blissful state last? Apparently it did. The speaker asks his lady to play Cressida to his Troilus, vowing that he will be forever grateful and happy if she does. By granting me your love, he insists,

So shall you make my sorowes slake,  
So shall you bring my wo to ende.  
And set me in as happy case,  
As Troylus with his lady was. (1: 185)

As one scholar remarked, it seems almost as if authors of such poems as the "Comparison" made heavy weather of Chaucer's poem and finally stalled after reading the first three books of it (Rollins 390). However, it seems worthwhile to ask why the speaker, anxious for his lady to show mercy and already imagining the joy he will feel when she does so, adopts the curious strategy of comparing her to Cressida, whose progress from infidelity to leprosy had been noised about for upwards of a century.

Skelton and his readers must have been able to compartmentalize Cressida into the abuser in *Philip Sparrow* and the beauty with whom Lady Elizabeth Howard is compared in the *Garlande of Laurell*. But here, with only one point of view, we need to ask what point of view the speaker wants the reader to adopt. If the intended reader was a well-wisher, we might imagine that he or she simply wanted to encourage the speaker to continue his faith in the beloved. If the intended reader was skeptical, perhaps she was supposed to offer a rebuttal in the manner of our poems from the *Paradise*. Again, perhaps the speaker is playing the innocent in order to elicit a response. Tottel evidently obtained many of the poems he included in the *Miscellany* from manuscript sources, so these poems may have had very personal

contexts necessarily largely lost in the more impersonal medium of print.

**“We might haue dwelt in former ioy”:**

**Cressida and the debate literature**

Henryson’s conflicted narrator knew that much could be said for as well as against Cressida. Subsequent debate literature based upon the Troilus-Cressida story reflects the dual perspective established by Henryson, but the debate over Cressida begins to become separated from the story of Cressida. For discussion here I select a pair of debate poems from the *Paradise of Dainty Devices* (1580 edn.) and a passage from Robert Greene’s frothy romance, *The Carde of Fancie* (1587). The *Paradise* debate poems are a complaint against Cressida signed by Troilus followed by Cressida’s vigorous signed reply. In his complaint, Troilus is less eager to prolong his love for Cressida than to ascribe her fall to flightiness:

Howbeit she could not tarry there,  
But needes forsooth a gadding go,  
To feele the tast of straungers chere,  
Nise noueltie is prickt her so  
She could not hold where she was well,  
But strayed and into ruin fell. (117)

In response, Cressida denies Troilus’s accusations and blames her problems on her forced departure from Troy and ultimately upon Troilus himself:

No gadding moode, but forced strife,  
Compelled me retyre from *Troy*:  
If Troylus would have vowed his wife,  
We might haue dwelt in former ioy. (118)

Troilus adopts the position taken only by Pandarus in Chaucer’s work: “What sholde I seyen? I hate, ywys, Cryseyde; / And, God woot, I wol hate hiere evermore!” (*Troilus* 5.1732-33). Meanwhile, Cressida no longer laments, “O, rolled shal I ben on many a tonge! / Thorughout the world my belle shal be ronge!” (5.1058-62), but instead denounces Troilus as a craven bell ringer who ought instead to have stepped

forward to become a responsible husband. The debate form mirrors the debate within Henryson's narrator between Cressida's actions and her beauty, but the debate content is based on incidents from neither Chaucer nor Henryson. Rhetorical ingenuity is beginning to triumph over fidelity to Chaucer-Henryson content.

Similar rhetorical display without Chaucer-Henryson content can be seen in Greene's *Carde of Fancie*, where Valericus pleads for the hand of the highborn Castania by promising to remain as true to her as Troilus was to Cressida. At first glance this may seem little more than embroidery on Cresseid's exclamation, "O fals Cresseid, and trew Kniht Troilus" (*Testament* lines 547, 553, 560). However, Greene's Valericus is no true Troilus but rather a fortune hunter who employs the true Troilus trope in a rhetorical attack intended to deceive Castania into marrying him so he can enjoy the life of ease for which he is unwilling to work (4: 53-55). Cressida is rapidly becoming what Renaissance proverb lore termed a nose of wax (Massinger 2: 266; Tilley H531, L104, N226). She is rapidly becoming available to be fashioned into various shapes—beautiful woman, yielding lover, emblem of falsehood, monument to God's justice, and more.

We can see in Henryson a range of rhetorical possibilities as the narrator tries to come to grips with Cresseid's tragedy and his own admiration for her. We can see in such overtly rhetorical works as the poems from the *Paradise* and the passages from Greene's *Carde of Fancie* how these possibilities can be exploited inside or outside the contexts from which they arose. I believe that one can trace a similar development in single-speaker Troilus-Cressida lyrics from the same period. Though not always the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge, these poems as discursive formations shape the realities in which they are implicated and do not merely reflect them in unmediated form. These poems, lamps and not mirrors, employ the Troilus-Cressida story to perform their own cultural and rhetorical work. In the remainder of this essay, I suggest some directions in which this thesis might take us.

**"Cressids crafte shall kepe the feeld":  
The arrival of the one-dimensional Cressida**

It is best to admit first off that this cultural work is not pleasant to behold. When Cressida ceases to be rooted in the story of her love for and betrayal of Troilus, she becomes a disembodied character in search of an author. Conversely, one might say that she becomes a

disembodied character for whom authors searched whenever they wanted to point a moral or adorn whichever tale they happened to be telling. Cressida poems intended for print rather than for manuscript circulation become less subtle. Through numbers of them runs either self-interested invective or special pleading. A few examples will suffice out of many that could be chosen.

A rather dolorous lyric, "The Louer to his beloued, by the name of fayre, and false," exemplifies the invective. In this production an aggrieved, remorselessly eloquent lover mixes abject regret that his lady abandoned him with stern lectures on what will soon happen to her. In his lecture mode he tells her,

If thy deserts then bids mee write, I cannot well reuoke it,  
I shall not spare to shew thy spite, I will no longer cloake it:  
As *Troylus* truth shall bee my sheeld, to kepe my pen from  
    blame,  
So *Cressids* crafte shall kepe the feeld, for to resound thy  
    shame. (*Gorgeous Gallery* 59)

In most incongruous fashion, the speaker at first acts the part of a lovelorn swain and then turns into a sort of Cato lecturing Heliogabalus on moral conduct. Similarly, George Gascoigne in "To a gentlewoman who had refused him and chosen a husband (as he thought) much inferior to himselfe," addresses her,

And though my just desert, thy pittie could not move,  
Yet wyl I washe in wayling wordes, thy childishe love.  
And say as *Troylus* sayde, since that I can no more,  
Thy wanton wyll did waver once, and woe is me.  
(*Works* 1: 88)

Again, the poem is self-referential, its focus being a juvenile speaker who wavers between gushing protests of love and waspish efforts to condemn the lady before she rejects him.

Gascoigne's "To a gentlewoman" illustrates the trope of special pleading. This poem has the merit of being superficially Chaucerian. After all, Chaucer's Troilus and Pandarus tell Cressida some dozen times that, if she does not pity Troilus, i.e., if she does not love him solely because he loves her, everyone will blame her for Troilus's death. She will be guilty of having killed the noblest warrior and most

loyal servant that ever a lady had the good fortune to attract. Alas, except for the name there is no Cressida in the poem. To the overheated lover who professes love and then blames the lady if she does not reciprocate it, one responds as Shakespeare's Rosalind responds to Orlando when he claims he will die without her love: "Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love" (*As You Like It* 4.1.106-8).

**"Halfe hungerstarved, miserably arrayed":  
Male readership and the eclipse of Cressida**

I have suggested that in the sixteenth century a dual perspective on Cressida, on the disconnect between her beauty and her conduct, between her life and its end, found its origins in the narrator of the *Testament*. In the Skelton poems examined earlier this perspective is alive and well, as it is in the selections from Elderton and from *Tottel's Miscellany*. First in the debate poems and then in the single-speaker lyrics noted above, the debate—the agonistic element—persists, but jest, invective, denunciation, and outright invention of content supplant the Chaucer-Henryson story. To modern readers, this progress can be disconcerting because it takes us away from the tradition of which Chaucer and Henryson are the English fountainheads. But as we asked how people read Henryson's *Testament*, so we can ask how they read poems now only nominally based on the content of the Troilus-Cressida story. This question is bound up with who was buying the books and who was reading them.

One study of wills and legal depositions taken in the 1630's has suggested that some 15% of female deponents were wives or widows of clergymen, gentlemen, and professional men. The rate of illiteracy for this composite female category was about 1%. The other 85% of female deponents were wives or widows of tradesmen or craftsmen (whose rate of illiteracy was about 44%) or of husbandmen (whose rate of illiteracy was about 79%). However, the rate of illiteracy for all women was 89% (Cressy 116-19). These statistics also show that no group of women, regardless of social status, was yet highly literate. Such a conclusion suggests that no group of female readers existed that was large enough to become the target of publishers' marketing efforts. Perforce, books were directed to a male clientele. A woman "was in the same category for testamentary purposes as idiots and outlaws" (106)—themselves not great readers either.

Let us examine a single text in more detail. Gascoigne's friend George Turberville cited the Troilus-Cressida story some forty times in the several volumes credited to him. One especially interesting example is his "To his absent Friend the Lover writes of his unquiet and restlesse state" (*Epitaphes* 51-54). Though ostensibly he wants to urge his beloved to remain faithful to him, he adduces mostly negative, off-putting examples. Here is one of them:

Let Cressed myrror bee, that did forgo  
Hir former faythfull friend, King Priams sonne,  
And Diomed the Greeke imbraced so,  
And left the love so well that was begonne:  
But when hir cards were tolde and twist ysponne,  
She found hir Trojan friend the best of both,  
For he renouncet her not, but kept his oth. (*Epitaphes* 54)

Turberville's indebtedness to Chaucer and Henryson has been noted, but less commonly noted is the way in which love and fear—or what may be masking as love and fear—coexist in the poem. The speaker presents himself as worried, suppliant lover, yet his suspicions suggest that he distrusts or even desires to subjugate his lady. Of course, fervent love can coexist with nagging fear that this love will not be reciprocated, or that a rival will materialize, but the conflict itself prompts investigation into the social context of the poem and into the rhetoric that underlies it. In the same volume appears an outburst of misogyny called "Disprayse of Women, that allure and love not" (*Epitaphes* 104-09). The speaker in this complaint laments, "Deceit is (woman's) delight; / Great fraude in friendly lookes" (105), and, he moralizes, "To trust to rotten boughes / the danger well is seene" (108). Having aired these convictions, Turberville trots out Medea, Helen of Troy, and of course Cressida,

Who for hir lightnesse may presume with falsest on the row;  
Else would she not have left a Trojan for a Greeke.  
(*Epitaphes* 108-09)

Whether or not "To his absent Friend" can fairly be interpreted through the misogynistic "Disprayse" would require a longer argument than I have space to provide. What can be fairly concluded is that, in these poems, the Troilus-Cressida story does not so much reflect male-female

relationships as project male fear of being not the betrayer but the betrayed, and that the complex Cressida we remarked on earlier has been transformed into a mere light-of-love, all in the service of legitimizing the fears that beset the male ego and, one suspects, transforming them into agreeable sport. Cressida and poems about Cressida degenerate into very small pieces in a very large male bonding game. Such bonding could take several forms. Men could celebrate the joys of being in love, at which time it was convenient to emphasize Troilus's joys and to play down his sorrows. They could lament the sorrows of being uncertain, dejected, neglected, rejected, or (in the few poems that deal explicitly with leprosy) infected. In the intellectual play that such friendly competition begot, Cressida became the shuttlecock batted about by young men wielding rackets of wish fulfillment.

Book production increased dramatically during the sixteenth century, and vernacular books account for much of this increase. Publishers marketed books, like *Turbervile's Tragical Tales*, that invoke the Troilus-Cressida story frequently, and passed on the rights to them as a kind of legacy. London teemed with literate young men in search of fashion and excitement and prepared to pay for it. Everyone has remarked on the fashion, toward the end of the century, for stories about such pathetic ladies as Rosamond Clifford and Jane Shore. Tales, whether in prose or verse, about attractive fallen women, some penitent and dressed in white sheets, some with fetching stories of their own looseness, some corrupted by the promises of worldly male opportunists, some in sartorial disarray, most in tears, and all in varying stages of helplessness were written almost exclusively by male authors, almost exclusively for the delectation of male readers, who willingly shelled out their shillings and pence to purchase them.

Cressida in Chaucer and in Henryson is one of the most complex and varied characters in English literature. Had she retained the stature Chaucer and Henryson gave her, Shakespeare might have written of her more in the way he wrote of Cleopatra. How could fair Cressida, often portrayed in all her complexity, end up as a name with which aspiring young male lovers insulted the ladies who had the temerity to reject them? Granting even this development, why couldn't she hold her own against fair Rosamond Clifford and poor Jane Shore in the literary game of male bonding, if nowhere else? The reason may be obvious already. Fair Rosamond and poor Jane were sympathetic. By contrast, Cressida had been so debased as to appear "in tattered weedes, halfe hungerstarved, (and) miserably arrayed," as one moralist put it, covered



“with scabs, leprosie, and mayngie . . .” (Whetstone 35). So much for male wish fulfillment. To see Cressida as she appears in 1600 and to compare her with the marvelous Chaucer-Henryson creation is to ask what to make of a diminished thing. Diminishment did not begin with Henryson—if anything, Henryson explored more fully than Chaucer the problem of judging the acts of a character one also loves. Nor did it begin with the authors during the next several decades, who deserve more credit than they have received for holding in solution the emotional tensions explored by Henryson. Cressida did not become a mere counter until poets, retaining the Henrysonian dialectic without the Chaucer-Henryson story, made Henryson’s “fair Cresseid” into an object of jest, invective, special pleading, and invented material. Their purpose by now had become less to “excuse, as farfurth as I may, / Thy womanheid, thy wisdom and fairness” (*Testament*, lines 86-87) than to provide young men about town with cheap entertainment.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Cressida’s name was spelled in a dozen or more ways during the medieval and Early Modern periods. In general discussion I refer to Cressida, and when quoting and discussing Henryson I adopt Henryson’s spelling.

<sup>2</sup>In this essay references to Thynne’s edition of 1532 and Speght’s editions of 1598 and 1602 follow the handsome facsimile volume published by Scholar Press. Full bibliographic details are given in the list of works cited.

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